

KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief

Increasing the Percentage of Children Living in Two-Parent Families

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

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Today, about one-third of children in the U.S. do not live with two parents. The percentage of nonmarital childbearing increased sharply in recent decades, then leveled off in the mid-1990s. Approximately one in tenth births was to an unmarried woman in 1970, compared with one in three in 1998 (Terry-Humen, Manlove, and Moore, 2001). At the same time, nearly 60 percent of new marriages end in divorce, and remarriage rates are down (Edin, 2000).

This trend tells us more about the state of marriage in the U.S. than it does about childbearing. The increase in childbearing outside of marriage reflects a decline in the likelihood of marriage in every age group. For example, in 1970 only 16 percent of all women aged 25 to 29 were unmarried; by 1998, 45 percent were unmarried. This decrease has been ascribed to a later age at first marriage, a higher divorce rate, and a growing number of people who never marry (Terry-Humen, Manlove, and Moor, 2001).

Cohabitation—two people living together in a marriage-like relationship—is another key factor. In fact, recent declines in the percentage of births to married couples are due almost entirely to an increase in births to cohabiting parents (Terry-Humen, Manlove, and Moore, 2001). Giving birth outside of marriage is not necessarily synonymous with single parenthood.

The trend away from marriage in recent decades has contributed to a widening income gap and higher rates of child poverty (Lerman, 1996). Even when they live with a partner, women who have births outside of marriage are more disadvantaged than women who have births within marriage. On average, they have lower educational attainment and less income. And teen mothers are not the only group who face economic hardship. Unmarried women who are in their twenties or older at the time they give birth are just as likely to live in poverty as unmarried women who give birth as teens (Terry-Humen, Manlove, and Moore, 2001).

Among employed adults, unmarried women who support families have the greatest risk of living in poverty. They often have time constraints that can affect their ability to supervise their children, offer emotional support, take an active part in their education, and arrange other

activities for them. When children live with one parent, it is most often the mother. Policymakers have therefore expressed concern about the opportunities afforded to children in one-parent households to have relationships with male role models who might contribute to their development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

For all of these reasons, researchers and policymakers generally view the percentage of children living in two-parent families as an important indicator of child well-being.

This indicator brief outlines six broad strategies for increasing the percentage of children living in two-parent families:

- **Address the linkages between economic security and stable families.**
- **Discourage nonmarital childbearing and encourage family formation.**
- **Remove obstacles to marriage.**
- **Adopt policies aimed at increasing the chances of marital success.**
- **Ensure that children benefit from both parents' emotional and financial support.**
- **Support research on the effects of family structure on children's well-being.**

1. Address the linkages between economic security and stable families.

In recent years, researchers and policymakers have placed greater weight on economic factors that undermine family formation and stability, especially drops in the employment rate and earning power of unskilled men (Wilson, 1987). As one policy analyst has concluded, "Stable employment is the sine qua non of establishing life-long family commitments and re-establishing marriage as an important building block in the kinship system" (Furstenberg, 1998, p. 12). A crucial challenge is therefore to help low-skill workers gain the economic stability needed to form and support families. (Numerous strategies for meeting this challenge are discussed in the KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief entitled "Increasing the Percentage of Children with Working Parents.")

- **Base public policies and investments on a clear understanding of the relationship between economic opportunity and family formation.** Some researchers link the decline in marriage rates to a scarcity, in low-income neighborhoods, of marriageable men who are

perceived as suitable partners and reliable breadwinners (Edin, 2000). They observe that marriage is more common in areas where men's employment opportunities and earnings are high (McLanahan & Casper, 1996).

- **Expand job training and employment services to include more men in high-poverty communities.** Many training and employment programs are designed to reduce welfare rolls by helping recipients of public assistance gain employment. Because most welfare recipients are women with children, these policies tend to overlook the training and employment needs of the men in their communities. They may have the unintended consequence of increasing tension between men and women and reducing the pool of men available for marriage. The goal should be to expand current programs, not to shift resources from women to men. Job training, work experience opportunities, and employment assistance are keys to helping fathers and mothers become better marriage partners and providers.
- **Address the employment needs of men who have been incarcerated.** In high-poverty communities, substantial numbers of men have prison records. For these individuals, finding gainful employment is especially difficult. Jobs initiatives need to provide intensive assistance and support to these men if they are to gain marketable skills and win the trust of prospective employers. Jobs initiatives may also need to challenge employers' restrictive hiring practices.

2. Adopt policies that discourage nonmarital childbearing and encourage family formation.

The rhetoric of welfare reform has reflected a desire to strengthen marriage and the family. The 1996 welfare reform legislation took steps to reduce the number of single-parent families by mandating restrictions on benefits to unwed teenage parents under age 18 who do not live at home and attend school; offering bonuses to the five states that rank highest in decreasing nonmarital births while decreasing abortion; and requiring states to outline their plans for establishing goals and taking action to prevent and reduce the incidence of nonmarital pregnancies, with special emphasis on teen pregnancies.

- **Encourage healthy behaviors in young people.** Many experts favor a broad, more positive approach to reducing the number of young, single mothers—one that addresses young men as well as young women, encourages a broad range of healthy behaviors, fosters sound decision

making, and provides incentives for postponing parenthood, staying in school, pursuing career goals, and forming positive, stable relationships. States can develop or expand programs designed to enhance the educational and social development of youth. Efforts to address the underlying predictors of early childbearing (poverty, family dysfunction, early behavior problems, and early school failure) can be part of this effort.

- **Focus on preventing subsequent pregnancies to teen mothers.** About one-fifth of teen births are to mothers who already have one or more children (Moore, Manlove, & Connon, 1998). Prenatal and infancy home visitation programs by nurses have been shown to help prevent subsequent pregnancies

3. Remove obstacles to marriage.

When it comes to family matters, federal authority tends to be weak. States vary greatly in terms of the political will and capacity to promote marriage and enforce parental obligations (Garfinkel, McLanahan, Meyer, & Seltzer, 1998). While promoting marriage may be problematic, governments can remove and avoid obstacles to marriage:

- **Identify and remove disincentives to marry.** The 1996 welfare law relaxed prohibitions that kept two-parent families from receiving public assistance. Every state now allows two-parent families to receive TANF. There is some evidence that removing or reversing economic disincentives can increase marriage rates (Hu, 1998). All levels of government can identify and root out laws, policies, regulations, and procedures that create a disincentive to form stable relationships.
- **Change tax policies that penalize marriage.** Eliminating tax provisions that act as disincentives to marriage and two-parent families is a practical strategy to promote marriage. The recent revisions to the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and other provisions in the tax code are positive steps. States could further progress in this direction by eliminating marriage penalties in their own tax codes.

4. Adopt policies aimed at increasing the chances of marital success.

Because marriage entails a personal commitment and has, for many Americans, a religious aspect as well, public policies related to marriage and divorce often spark heated debate. Policies intended to sustain marriage can also become controversial when they fail to take into account the difficulties faced by victims of domestic abuse. Nevertheless, concern about a high divorce rate has moved some communities and states to take measures to increase couples' chances of staying together, especially when children are involved. Existing strategies include:

- **Incorporate premarital education into high school curricula.** In Florida, for example, a marriage education bill requires that marriage and relationship skill education be included in the “life management” class already taught in high school.
- **Offer counseling and education aimed at fostering trust between men and women.** Some researchers observe that in communities where unemployment is especially high, distrust between men and women has increased in recent decades. Men and women tend to face different daily realities and look at the world from different standpoints. There is a need to have counseling and education aimed at building trust between the sexes. Such programs can be offered as part of educational and social services, through family-life education, parent education, family support or mental health/counseling services. They can be situated in religious organizations or secular agencies (Furstenberg, 1998).
- **Create incentives for premarital education or counseling.** Some states have introduced incentives, such as shorter waits or lower fees for marriage licenses, to couples who take part in premarital education programs. The U.S. military is strongly encouraging married enlistees to attend marriage-education classes. Many members of the clergy are urging other pastors to use systematic premarital education for all engaged couples. A variety of program models exist. PREP (The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) is a short course that provides tools for discussing important relationship issues without fighting. Marriage Savers enlists members of the clergy and officials in a given community to support marriage in a variety of ways, including training older mentor couples to give premarital education to engaged couples.

- **Expand the options for marrying couples.** Louisiana has legislated “covenant” marriage as an option for couples. Couples who choose this option cannot easily dissolve the marriage. This policy is controversial, however. Some authorities on marriage believe that laws that make divorce difficult to obtain work against the interests of victims of spousal or child abuse.
- **Educate divorcing couples about the impact of their decision on minor children.** Some states have formal procedures for apprising divorcing couples of research on the impact of divorce on minor children.

5. **Ensure that children benefit from both parents’ emotional and financial support.**

Finally, policymakers are taking steps to ensure that whatever their living arrangements, children benefit emotionally and economically from both parents. They are crafting policies and programs designed to support fragile families, help non-custodial become good nurturers and providers, and enforce their child support obligations.

- **Support fragile families.** Recent studies show that the great majority of unwed fathers are strongly attached to their families, at least at the outset, and that when they give birth, most unwed mothers are living with or have ongoing relationships with the father of their children. Researchers refer to these families as “fragile families.” According to researchers, most unwed fathers want to help raise their child, and most mothers are eager to have help. However, most unwed fathers are ill prepared to support their new family. Nearly half lack a high school degree and only one-fifth have education beyond high school. Those who work tend to earn very low wages. Efforts to improve the prospects of men with low skills and education can make a difference—especially at the time a new baby arrives, when motivation is very high (McLanahan, 1999).
- **Enforce fair child support requirements.** In recent years, most states have introduced stronger measures to enforce child support as part of welfare reform (Bernard & Knitzer, 1999). Child support legislation reflects the widespread conviction that even low-income fathers can make some contribution to their children’s care. Proponents of tougher enforcement cite evidence that increasing nonresident fathers’ financial investments in children may increase their motivation to spend time with them and take part in important

decisions about their lives. In some cases, however, collecting child support may carry risks for mothers and children. Victims of domestic violence usually want to pursue child support, but may incur risks in doing so. Child support and public assistance agencies must therefore be prepared to coordinate information and services for victims of domestic violence.

- **Develop fairer child support requirements for poor fathers.** A study by Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation found that 60 percent of poor non-custodial fathers had child support orders for more than half of their monthly incomes (Miller & Knox, 2001). Small-scale pilot programs designed to help alleviate the problems of unrealistically huge child support arrears debt have shown increases in both the dollars received by custodial mothers and the time spent by these fathers with their children (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002)
- **Increase pass-through to mothers on TANF.** For families receiving TANF, there is, in many states, a disincentive to pay child support because it ends up reducing TANF benefits to the family, almost dollar for dollar. If child support is to truly bolster family income, then federal and state strategies need to allow larger shares of child support payments to flow directly to low-income families.
- **Help non-custodial fathers earn enough to support their children.** Researchers have concluded that tougher child support enforcement, by itself, will not change children's economic status. Most nonresident fathers who do not pay child support have very low incomes. According to a recent report by the Urban Institute, nearly 30 percent of the 2.5 million poor non-custodial fathers are incarcerated, while the remainder were either unemployed or earned an average annual income of just \$5,600. (Sorenson & Zibman, 2000) Harsher treatment of non-custodial low-income fathers makes no sense absent efforts to help them qualify for, find, and keep jobs (Garfinkel et al , 1998). Recently the number of federal and state policies, programs and resources aimed at re-engaging fathers in their children's lives is increasing. The most promising include education assistance, job training and peer support groups for low-income fathers and counseling and mediation for their families (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002).
- **Support fathers as nurturers as well as breadwinners.** States can take advantage of changes in welfare laws that give them the flexibility to make responsible parenthood part of

their welfare reform agendas. They can use monies available from case closures to support parent education and family support programs, especially those that help both mothers and fathers become better nurturers as well as economic providers (Bernard & Knitzer, 1999). Creating more father-friendly workplaces and employment policies is a major challenge.

- **Reinforce a shift in attitude.** A strategic use of the media, including public service announcements, can promote provide positive images of responsible fathers (Cohen, 1999).

6. Support research on the effects of family structure on children's well-being.

Researchers are beginning to learn more about the impact of different kinds of families on children, and about the kinds of interventions that can strengthen mother-father relationships, promote healthy parent-child interactions, and foster family formation and permanence. But many important questions remain unanswered. At the same time, many misperceptions about nonmarital childbearing and single-parenthood remain unchallenged and may, at times, influence policymaking.

- **Support studies that shed light on the effects of growing up in single-parent families.** Those who study the impact of family structure on children generally agree that growing up in a single-parent family increases the likelihood that children will have academic and behavioral problems. However, these outcomes seem to stem more from the greater economic stress and time pressures associated with single-parent families, than from any direct effects of living with one parent (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). More research is needed to differentiate the effects of family structure from the effects of diminished resources. When researchers find that children in single-parent families have poorer outcomes, are they actually seeing the impact of economic disadvantage? Are they viewing, from another perspective, the impact of a factor that is known to have a major influence on children's outcomes, namely maternal education? Other questions need better answers as well. For example, does the effect of single-parent family structure depend on a child's age? Are children's outcomes affected by other factors that distinguish single-parent from two-parent households? (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000).
- **Support studies that lead to a more nuanced understanding of the realities of two-parent families.** Policy discussions of marriage and fatherhood tend to assume that children

benefit from the presence in the home of two parents or two parental figures. However, several studies now suggest that children's well-being hinges on the composition of the household, not just the number of adults who are present. For example, mother-stepfather families do not produce better child outcomes, on average, than single-parent families. This is particularly true when stepfathers are introduced into the household when children are adolescents (Cherlin & Fomby, 2002).

- **Support research on the impact of welfare and economic policy on family formation.**

Researchers have reported a modest trend toward two-parent families in the late 1990s. There is some evidence that welfare policies have influenced family structure, since a net movement toward two-parent families has been observed among families that left the welfare rolls after the implementation of welfare reform. But nearly half of the transitions into two-parent families occurred among families that had not received welfare since that time, or who never received it. This suggests that events other than welfare reform were also involved. Researchers believe that the strong economy and low unemployment of the late 1990s influenced family formation in low-income communities. They point as well to the expansion of policies aimed at supplementing earnings, notably the Earned Income Tax Credit (Cherlin & Fomby, 2002).

- **Translate research findings about births outside of marriage so that public perceptions match realities.** The public tends to view an unmarried mother as a teen, a member of a racial or ethnic minority group, a first-time mother, and a single parent. The realities are more complex (Terry-Humen, Manlove, and Moore 2001):

- Teens now account for a diminishing share of all nonmarital births; women in their early twenties have the highest rate of nonmarital births. Since 1970, the largest percentage point increase of births outside of marriage was among women aged 25 and older.
- Racial and ethnic disparities in nonmarital childbearing are narrowing, and whites show the greatest increase in births to cohabiting couples. Hispanic women now have the highest nonmarital birth rate of all racial and ethnic groups.
- Only about half of nonmarital births are first births.
- Unmarried parents are not necessarily single parents. Many children born outside of marriage are born to cohabiting couples. In the early 1980s, the percentage of

nonmarital births to cohabiting couples was 29 percent; by the early 1990s, the figure was 39 percent.

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